Lucia Graves, an extract from *A Woman Unknown*

My favourite saint was, of course, my namesake, St Lucia, one of the many early Christian martyrs, who is represented holding a salver with two eyes placed on it, and a palm in the other hand. I wore a medal of St Lucia round my neck — I had somehow plucked up the courage to ask my parents for it. She is the patron saint of good eyesight, and consequently of seamstresses, because she is said to have had her eyes pulled out in her martyrdom, though I have since discovered that there is no historical truth in that gruesome story. Her day is celebrated on 13 December, just a few days before the winter solstice, and her name comes from the Latin *lux*, so her feast day probably replaced some ancient European ritual to the dying sun. In Sweden St Lucia's Day is an important feast and one December, at about this time, I was taken by my father to a party at the Swedish consulate in Palma, where I was dressed up in a long white robe and asked to wander around a crowded room balancing a crown of lighted candles on my head. And in Italy, where we went on a few summer holidays to visit my half-sister Jenny in Portofino, I collected *occhi di Santa Lucia* — St Lucy's eyes — from the nearby beach of Rapallo, flat shell-like stones, no bigger than a fingernail, with blue or brown circles on them, which I treasured as much as my *estampas*.

But would I ever get to Heaven and escape the eternal flames? Would I ever be able to persuade my parents that I must be baptised? And even if I did, how could I be truly happy there if none of my family were with me? I would be separated from them, worrying for all eternity about their destiny. It was all such a muddle.

When we skipped and sang and formed large rings that turned right and then left, and chased one another in the playground, I could put those anxious thoughts aside. But in the classroom there were too many reminders of my shortcomings. Neither of the two Saviours on the wall could have approved of me. For a start I was English, and the English were mostly evil Protestants who, moreover, had taken Gibraltar unlawfully from Spain. And although I myself had not been baptised into any religion, my parents were theoretically Church of England, and anything Christian that was not Roman Catholic was

classified as Protestant. 'Protestants are heretics who deny the authority of the Church and interpret the Bible as they see fit,' said our catechism. A man who lived two floors above us was a Spanish Protestant and he always had very badly paid jobs because of his religion, even though he was a qualified lawyer or something equally important. He was tall and thin and rather pale and the neighbours never greeted him or his wife except with a nod. We felt very sorry for him and sometimes he would drop in for a drink with my father. We also had an English friend who ended up in the Palma prison because he was caught distributing Jehovah's Witness leaflets. What would happen to my father if they discovered his theories on the Crucifixion? Would the Civil Guards come to our flat one day and take him away in handcuffs? Franco looked down at me from his photograph, and I tried to see mercy in his eyes.

The crucifix next to Franco was an even less encouraging sight. I knew Jesus was feeling sad for me, the *inglesita* who had to go up to the choir and stand by the organ when the whole school took Holy Communion in the chapel, the little English girl whose Protestant parents would not allow her to join the Catholic Church. Of course He knew, because He knew everything, that I had not actually asked my parents for permission to become a Catholic. 'My parents won't let me,' was what I told everyone, but I was not being entirely truthful. Every day, when I listened to Sister Valentina's lectures, I made up my mind that I would ask my parents that very evening, but when evening came, I always put it off for the following evening. Partly because I did not think my parents would understand my deep concern, but also because I felt I would be betraying them by going over to the other side, so to speak. This was my English world, and when I stepped into the flat after school, smelt my mother's cooking, saw the jar of Marmite, or the tin of Tate & Lyle's golden syrup on the kitchen table — treasures someone had brought over from England for us — and moved about all the familiar pieces of furniture, with books like my *Girl Annual* and my brother's *Swift* comics lying about the place, those problems seemed to melt away. It was only when I turned off the light at night that Sister Valentina's threats made me get out of bed, kneel down and pray — and try to get my brother Juan to pray too. Our religion books depicted God as a luminous triangle with an

eye in its centre, and I could almost see the triangle hovering over my bed.

In one of her less aggressive moments Sister Valentina told me that if I died before being baptised I might be admitted to Limbo, the place where infants went if they died before having been received into the Catholic Church. Even though I was not a newly born infant, she said, I might be able to go there, so long as I died without being in mortal sin. So every night I examined my conscience and begged forgiveness for my many sins, just in case I died in my sleep — quite a common thing, the nuns told us, and one should always be prepared. I pictured Limbo as an enormous white room with a door that opened every now and again to let someone new in. It was a quiet, still, neutral place where at least I would not burn, and where I could flit about aimlessly in a white robe with lots of little unbaptised, nameless infants — for ever.

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